

Refuge In Audacity (or Die Trying)

by Heir of the void

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Summary: July, 1998. The BETA invasion of Japan has just begun with millions already dead in the opening hours of the battle. On the fields of forsaken Kyushu, an impossibility appears, and a young man finds himself inexplicably placed at the head of the treacherous path of glory and tragedy, a player in a tale of ubiquitous horror and ordinary heroism.

1. Chapter 1

This story does not start with my death. For some reason, I feel like that's how it should go, but if I did die when the ragged hole in reality crackling with colorless lighting and vaguely painful to look at appeared in front of me, then its officially bullshit and doesn't count.

Don't get me wrong; if I'd done something brilliant, like running into the hole in everything or poking it with a stick, it would have been fair game. That said, I did the smart thing and started backing away slowly. As soon as I had a clear path of retreat, I turned to run.

I never got that far. Just as I was turning around and wondering what kind of radiation dose I was soaking up, a massive faintly-clawed hand somehow made of the same absence as the hole appeared reaching out from the hole, grabbed me just tightly enough to be unpleasant, and dragged me out of reality.

The last thing I remembered was turning off the part of my brain responsible for logical thought. It seemed obsolete. Then I hit the event horizon.

I'm fairly sure I disintegrated.

Luv and Drugs-01

Waking up was unusual, for several reasons. For one thing, I rarely

needed my alarm clock to wake up on time, but that hardly proves anything. However, the fact that I only had one alarm clock, which should not have been capable of producing the cacophony I was now hearing, was somewhat more concerning.

It took me a second to realize that I was sitting in some sort of chair. This immediately became the most concerning factor in the situation.

I opened my eyes. I was sitting in some kind of control station, almost like the cockpit of an aircraft, sans windows. If it weren't for the relatively simply nature of the control panel laid out in front of me-

System exiting standby mode. Please wait.

Huh. Writing on my vision. Tilting my head confirmed that the words stayed in the same spot on my field of view. That was definitely odd.

At that moment, the standby message disappeared as the cockpit around me came to life. It seemed vaguely familiar, like I'd seen the setup somewhere before.

"Someone help! They're everywhere, we can't hold here much longer-"

"This is Appaloosa Flight 3, we are under heavy attack and ammunition is in the red. Requesting relief or resupply."

"I'm the only one left! How-"

One of the monitors, which appeared to show a sort of simplified map, abruptly lit up red, glowing like a bed of coals. Distress signals.

What was going on?

Several sensations followed in quick succession. A sudden chill, followed by something like my hand falling asleep, but on my entire body and considerably angrier, followed by what can only be described as the feeling of licking a substation transformer. I suffered this in stoic silence, and there isn't anyone who can contradict my account.

Standard Fortified Suit connection established - Nominal Fortified Suit. I knew I'd heard that one before.

Secondary Array Mind Impulse Unit connection established - Nominal

System ver 1.03 - A-12 Avenger

Fully online.

"Oh God." I muttered, as the system start notification vanished. This couldn't be-

The last thing I remembered was being dragged into a ragged hole in

reality. Of course it could be.

July 7 1998. BETA forces have crossed the Tsushima Strait and made landfall in Kyushu, Japan. Estimated strength is upward of one million combat units, Destroyer/Grappler heavy. Die or fly.

Good Hunting.

With that, my main display activated, revealing the hellscape outside.

It was clearly night, though the burning city in the near distance provided plenty of illumination even without my low-light/night vision systems. Flashes of light appeared in quick sequence from somewhere over the horizon, each one briefly highlighting the vast, rolling clouds of smoke presently filling the sky. Corpses littered the ground on one side of the city; opening a zoomed view for a closer look only confirmed what I suppose I already knew.

BETA. Grappler-class, like soft-bodied crustaceans with a pair of massive bludgeons in the place of pincer claws and a strange sensory organ like a deformed human head mounted on a sort of rigid tail rising from the back of the body.

Destroyer-class, six legs supporting a large body, generally unremarkable except for the massive arrowhead-shaped semi-conical carapace neatly covering the front half of the creature and providing near-complete protection against frontal attacks short of the full fury of a naval rifle.

I grinned slightly. We'd see about that.

My face froze. Where did that come from?

Before I could consider the matter any further, my motion detector alert went off. A view window open over my main display, showing a column of nearly a hundred of the larger strains of BETA.

Notably, these were very much alive.

Tentatively, I reached forward and grasped the twin control joysticks. They felt... Right. Not nearly as alien as the controls of a cutting-edge piece of military hardware from another dimension should have been.

One of the Grapplers stopped, its 'head' twitching in my direction.

I can fight, and if I don't, I die. My grip tightened on the control sticks. Worrying about the little things can come later.

My machine currently rested in a kneeling position; I wanted to fight standing up. So I stood, checking my weapons status.

R 1/2/3/4 - 100% - Ready

L 1/2/3/4 - 100% - Ready

Quench 1 - 100% - Ready

Quench 2 - 100% - Ready

Quench 3 - 100% - Ready

Quench 4 - 100% - Ready

Weapons were good to go. I probably wouldn't need the shoulder cannons for this, and the range was short enough that using indirect-fire weapons would be a waste.

Shifting the footing of my Avenger, I leveled its forearms, and the shield-like ordinance pods mounted on the outside of both, at the enemy. Angles were good, power was normal, fire control was ready.

I took a deep breath, nodded, and pressed the firing studs.

Electromagnetic power uncoiled in each of the eight railguns, energy born from the Avenger's atomic reactor and trapped in layered supercarbon capacitor stacks flowing down the various conductive rails and armatures of each gun. It was an intricate, yet precisely and elegantly choreographed symphony, one which culminated in the expulsion of a 27.5mm shell at more than four times the local speed of sound.

Three of those shells missed their targets entirely. One winged a smaller Tank-class. Its fuse, designed for internal detonation on a Grappler or Destroyer, did not trigger in time, and the round overpenetrated and detonated an instant after exiting the monster.

A second Tank was less lucky, the fifth shell impacting center of body mass and detonating internally, to lethal effect, and the three remaining rounds struck the unarmored back of a Destroyer-class, with similar results.

The next volley arrived less than half a second later.

I focused on the Destroyers, firing in short bursts as I swept the column. They really did go down easily once you had a clear shot at someplace not covered by carapace, and none of them managed to turn in time to make that a problem. The Tank and Grappler-class died after that, far enough away that they never posed a real threat without the Destroyer-class to soak up fire.

Which left me with one key question. What now?

I couldn't survive on my own forever, or even for all that long. I hadn't expended much ammunition, but that had been a very small group of BETA. While the Avenger's atomic power system removed fuel as an immediate concern, but I had no idea what kind of mechanical operational endurance it had.

You couldn't survive something like this on your own, and I did have a giant robot. Saving someone from alien monsters couldn't be the worst way to make a first impression, and I was a bit short on better ideas.

Rail 1 - 100% - Ready

Rail 2 - 100% - Ready

I re-opened the signal register and began sorting through the distress signals I'd received, which appeared to be the only communications I was getting. Weird, but I'd already decided that thinking about weird things was going to be postponed until no Creatures were attempting to eat my face.

For my idea to work, I needed to find a properly imperiled unit. They needed to be in existential danger, but not so much that I'd get myself killed trying to help them. A larger unit was preferable, so as to maximize impact, but condition one would be trickier with a larger formation. If I could...

-There. U.S. Army 32nd Attack Squadron, low on ammo and heavily invested, but only minor actual losses. And... Imperial Guard Flights Zaku 1 and Zaku 3 operating in close proximity. Their losses were unsurprisingly worse, but it was hard to make out many details from the distress call. I wasn't entirely sure if I wanted to touch anything involving the Japanese Guard; political landmines were the last thing I needed, and my Klingon was rusty.

In any case, it was best to get the lay of the land before making a decision. I shifted the Avenger to a kneeling stance and fired.

The idea here was taking the concept of 'reconnaissance by fire' far too literally. Rather than mounting sensor gear on a drone to carry it over the battlefield, and thus incurring the loss of a not-inexpensive drone when it was lasered, I was simply firing a shell consisting of disposable sensors and a broadband tightbeam transmitter from each of the Avenger's back-mounted indirect-fire railguns.

How, exactly, it came to exist here was... Really no less puzzling than everything else that I wasn't thinking about.

The recon shells didn't give a very long look, but it was more than enough. The 32nd Attack Squadron and Zaku flights were...

They met my conditions, probably better than I could reasonably expect to find again before Kyushu was overrun, which would be sometime tomorrow if I remembered events correctly. And the group wasn't too far away, no more than a few minutes if I stayed low enough to avoid being lasered.

I felt the weight of my Avenger shift as its Jump Units powered up, then eased the craft forward.

"Alea iacta est." I muttered, trying to find a balance between altitude and speed. I managed that fairly, but no longer unexpectedly, quickly.

The BETA would've destroyed that house eventually.

After a few minutes in flight, I heard a crackle of static over my comms array, like someone trying to broadcast through a heavy metal cloud. The signal steadily improved as I drew closer, until my communications system managed to get a solid lock on the source and frequency. Directional antenna aligned, and suddenly I had a clear signal.

"-Say again, this is Wyrm 1 to incoming unit. State your mission and identification."

I needed to play this right. Probably best not to stand out, for now. Present myself like a pilot separated from my unit, and hope they don't draw the much less plausible conclusion. I could figure out the rest later.

"This is Seraph 1, moving to assist. Is that-"

"We have a brigade-scale herd forming up for a supported Destroyer wave." Wyrm 1 said, as she was more frustrated than scared by that fact. "If you're only one unit-"

I fired another set of recon shells, these at a lower speed and set to broadcast much more visibly in the direction of the enemy. Both made it upwards of five hundred meters before being burned down, meaning there probably weren't any Lasers in the immediate vicinity. But before they burned, the shells had allowed me to confirm the situation. I was approaching from Wyrm Squadron from behind the ridge they had set their backs to, so the Destroyer's frontal carapace would be in position to face my guns.

"They're beginning the charge." Wyrm 1 said. "There's no point in dying here with us, Seraph 1. If you can still fight, do it someplace where it might matter."

"Rodger that, Wyrm 1." I said, cresting the ridge and planting my feet a few meters down the reverse slope.

Power began to flow into the supercapacitor banks connected to my shoulder cannons, coolant pumps humming in preparation for extended firing.

"Thank you for the advice. I believe I'll do exactly as you suggest." Targeting matrix was open. Range/elevation projection complete, detonation commands were ready.

"Good." Wyrm 1 said, actually sounding relieved. "I hope we meet one day in that place where warriors take their rest."

The first Destroyer-class were crossing the four-kilometer mark.

"Killer Junior." I muttered, and pulled the trigger.

Electromagnets were energized and quenched in each of my four shoulder cannons, generating a wave of enormously powerful magnetic force that latched onto the casing of a 120mm round designed for just that purpose and accelerated it toward the enemy. Very quickly.

Each round followed a relatively flat trajectory, one calculated to bring it to a point about thirty meters above the ground and directly above the rear edge of a leading Destroyer's carapace.

Canister shot from a 120mm tank gun was not an anti-personnel weapon, at least in the sense that it was fully capable of destroying vehicles not built to withstand machine gun fire. The rounds I'd fired were intended for a similar effect, but not in a cone extending

three hundred meters from the barrel.

Instead, the high-explosive filler was intended to turn the thousand-plus metal balls filling the shell into a storm of metal radiating generally away from the detonation point.

The detonation point behind the line of destroyers.

My shells exploded essentially on target, the energetic propellant in each round blooming into blazing orange-white for the half-second it took to cool to invisibility.

I watched three of the living battering rams drop, tissue flayed beyond functionality by dozens or hundreds of supersonic chunks of tungsten carbide. At least as many of the creatures staggered but stayed up, their alien physiology allowing them to endure the damage.

I kept firing, discharging the quenchguns in sequence. One every two and a half seconds, so as to give the cooling systems a chance to keep up with the enormous heat generated by the weapons. And to conserve ammunition; the airburst shells were heavy, and I had fewer of them than I would have liked.

It was working. The airburst rounds weren't killing or maiming all, or even most, of the Destroyers. Events were proceeding as planned nonetheless.

A Destroyer-class line was so effective because each monster's unarmored flanks were protected by the carapaces of the beasts on either side, effectively preventing a TSF from strafing to the side and firing acute-angle shots at vulnerable rear of the Destroyer. It was effective defensively for largely the same reasons as a phalanx, and it added in the broad-front sweeping shock flavor of a heavy cavalry charge for a truly unpleasant recipe.

That said, phalanxes and heavy cavalry both had the same essential lynchpin.

Cohesion.

It was high time someone took that away from these freaks.

The same incredible momentum that made the Destroyer-class BETA so difficult to face was now working against them. Each one that fell presented a considerable obstacle to those behind it, and apparently Destroyers don't corner well.

But all the same, I wasn't stopping their advance. Their morale wouldn't break, so it was a simple question of arithmetic, and I wasn't killing them nearly fast enough.

Thankfully, I wasn't alone.

As the leading elements of the BETA swarm crossed the three-kilometer mark, the 32nd Attack Squadron went to work.

The twin light flares of Jump Unit drives provided enough illumination for me to make out the shapes of each the Warthogs in the two elements redlining their drives as they boosted in opposite

directions perpendicular to the BETA front. Four TSAs in each group, two GAU-8s each.

They reached their positions quickly and went to work. I ceased fire as they opened up; there was no need to waste ammo.

The loss of coherency of the Destroyer-class leading the charge had ruined their parallel protection, leaving individuals exposed to shots from the sides. The acute-angle shots were by no means easy, but the Law of Averages is a powerful thing, and the situation was certainly not one that called for restraint.

The streamers of orange fire extending from the twin rotary cannons on each Warthog reached out toward the swarm, picking out the aliens that had too far forward of their fellows. The bursts of 36mm shells conjured momentarily brilliant fountains of sparks where they struck carapace; the rounds on target were much less visible.

It was like watching an avalanche.

The Warthogs killed the BETA far faster than I had, presenting far more obstacles to those in what were now the secondary ranks. The effect was cascading too quickly for the BETA in the rear to control. The advance of the leading edge of the swarm slowed, then stalled entirely.

And a few moments later, something amazing happened. A Destroyer fell, and there was not another to replace it. Its spot was filled by a Grappler-class, which was ended by one of the three Warthogs holding the center with almost contemptuous ease. It happened again, a few seconds later.

And with that, this sliver of the Invasion of Japan turned from combat to butchery. The Grappler and Tank-class BETA, tightly packed behind the Destroyer wall, had no escape.

Which left me with a nagging feeling that I was missing something.

The Zaku Flights. Eleven A-10s accounted for the 32nd Attack Squadron, but I had yet to see a single TSF. Maybe that was for the best; I'd already gotten lucky here, and...

I sighed. Their distress beacon was still lit.

"I'm going to have to do the right thing here, aren't I?" I muttered, loading both my heavy railguns with recon shells and firing.

This time, both rounds made it more than a kilometer up before the lasers knocked them out. They easily achieved line-of-sight to the rough location of the Zaku flights, but they were considerably deeper in the smoke plume of the burning city, amplifying the problem caused by the ubiquitous heavy metal clouds. I started the analysis algorithms to try and make sense of what was actually in the area.

Then I thought about lasers.

The beams were at a higher angle this time, though. If they'd gotten higher because the intercepting Laser-class were further away, the

beam angle would have been the same as a lower interception by proportionally closer aliens.

That meant the Laser-class had engaged later, for one reason or another. Maybe they were dueling a warship or artillery battery, or a TSF squadron had run out of luck.

It wasn't difficult to determine the location of the laser class. The beams were invisible, obviously, but not difficult to track. Some photons were still scattered by the air, and when they struck a target, there would be a significant flash of light reflected off the surface and a plume of vaporized material back in the direction of the beam. Naturally, once you identified some section of the beam, there was only one spot on the ground it could have come from.

The computer had located the laser battery before I'd even finished my firing preparations. I set one knee on the ground; I wanted to keep the trajectory and the flight time both low, which meant high-velocity low-angle shots. Not particularly easy to do standing up.

I leaned forward, the autoloaders on the railguns whirring as they placed new shells at the base of the primary conductor rails. Not recon shells this time.

Using the neural controls was disconcerting, in a way, but amazing at the same time. I could never have moved my own body with the sort of milliradian precision this task called for, and the feedback from the computer assisted motions felt not quite right.

But on the other hand, I was moving a giant robot with my mind. The cloud was pretty big, but I had to try and scrape at least a few chocolate bars worth of silver off of it.

The alternative didn't bear thinking about.

With the guns in position and capacitors charged, I fired.

The heavy railguns exceeded the muzzle velocity of even my shoulder-mount cannons. They were intended for indirect fire, and the distance they would throw a shell was a function of its velocity. That was why long-range artillery pieces often still used a shell and multiple powder charges rather than a single cased round; using fewer charges, and thus firing a shell more slowly, actually made it easier to accurately hit a target closer than the maximum range of the gun.

With my railguns, that was considerably easier; I could dial the velocity up and down at will, like an arquebusier judging the amount of powder his weapon needed for a given shot.

I felt the first volley twice; once via feedback from my suit, and once as I felt myself move, anchored in the cockpit. It only took a moment to correct the angle for the second set, and a few more to accumulate power and cool the weapon.

My best sensor arrays were out of position to watch the shells in flight, but I still detected the plumes of the first two being vaporized just before and just after apogee. There was definitely something else happening; the lasers firing at some other set of

target. There were too many beam scatter trails for the lasers to be engaging just me.

I very carefully didn't think about how I knew that. It was getting easier, probably on account of the alarming about of practice I'd had.

The third salvo reached the terminal point; the thermal seekers should have locked on to the massive signature of the waste heat produced by laser fire, then corrected the flight path of the shells to ensure the ICM submunitions were spread over the proper area. I didn't pick up anything indicating that the fourth salvo had been intercepted.

Nearby, the guns of the 32nd Attack Squadron finally went silent. Glancing back at my thermal/ammunition charts, I realized just how short the engagement had been; the heat sinks for my quenchguns had yet to fully cool.

It was a strange, the almost eternal moment after the shooting stopped. I had faced life-or-death combat, but I'd survived. I'd won. The odds were long, but the fight was not unwinnable.

"Seraph 1, this is Wyrm 1."

A communication window opened on my display peripherals, showing me the face of Wyrm 1, a woman identified as Captain Ingrid Jensen. She looked younger than I would have expected for a multi-unit commander, but wartime exigence usually had that effect in extended conflicts. She had blonde hair in a shortish military cut, pale skin that stood in sharp contrast to the jet-black facial components of her fortified suit. Her eyes were faintly odd; the glacial blue of her irises made the red dots cast on her pupils by the retinal projection system much more noticeable.

I glanced down at myself; presumably she could see me. My present attire was essentially a fortified suit without the attempt at a Charisma bonus. I'm sure that was motivated by the shocking discovery that spalling kills, not any sort of concern about radiation leaking into the cockpit. It probably wouldn't cause any further suspicion.

"Rodger Wyrm 1, this is Seraph 1."

"Excellent work, Seraph." Captain Jensen said. "It's nice to finally see one of those experimental weapons in action. You aren't about to go into forced shutdown or something, are you?"

"No." I said. "We are still green in all respects."

"That's good to hear. We've got fuel, but you heard my call." She shook her head. "We're not quite at snake eyes on ammo yet, but that won't last if we have to perform again."

A notification appeared next to the comms window. Apparently my computer had located Zaku Flight and gotten a general idea of the surrounding area. Seven Type-82s still active, two wrecks, and more than a few Grapplers and Tanks.

"There's another unit nearby." I said, sending her the data packet.

"It-"

Ingrid's eyes widened. "How old is this?"

"A hundred and thirty seconds. Give or take."

"And you want to-"

"Save seven high-performance mobile weapons, yes." I said. "They were firing infrequently while my probe was up and appear to have swords drawn. Is this really a situation where we can afford to lose anything to something as easily fixed as empty magazines? We give them a chance to reload, and then they can die way more productively."

She grimaced. "That's... One of the colder justifications for an act of charity I've ever heard. But you're probably right, and a few hundred more BETA won't make a difference."

The window went to standby. A few seconds later, the Warthogs began shifting formation, and Ingrid re-appeared on my display.

"We're ready, for whatever it's worth." She said, something faintly predatory visible in her expression. "The Blizzard Wyrms, at your service. Is there any specific way you want to play this?"

It had occurred to be while I was bombarding the lasers that getting reloads might not be particularly easy. All of my electromagnetic weapons fired fairly simple projectiles, but they weren't the sort of thing that just grew on TOE charts. I needed to conserve ammunition somehow.

My Avenger had one weapon left that I hadn't deployed yet.

"Get your squad into firing positions around the target basin." I said, suppressing the sudden bout of nausea. "I'll move down to make contact and engage the enemy in-"

I sighed "-close combat."

[x]

Brigadier General Herschel Maxwell looked at his theater map. It wasn't so much that he needed to pull a rabbit out of a hat; that could be done. This situation, though, called for something much harder.

The massive BETA swarm had made landfall under the cover of the typhon, which had impeded satellite observation and made it difficult for smaller warships to deploy against them. The submariners had done what they could, but with upwards of a million BETA moving in a single swarm, it probably would have been impossible to completely prevent the enemy from making landfall even under normal conditions.

Already, mere hours after the invasion had begun, at least two million people were already dead or 'effective casualties'. The military losses had been bad, but were not catastrophic.

Yet.

Naturally, it was never just one problem. The U.S. Forces were present, well-supplied and outfitted with modern equipment, but they were hardly a ready garrison, and it showed. The idea of fixed fortifications may have fallen out of favor, but there was still plenty that could be done to prepare a defense; pre-placed ammunition caches, communication repeaters and fiber-optic landlines, ready fire plans with pieces pre-sighted for likely trouble spots and abundant ready ammunition.

It was sad, really. None of the measures he'd advocated would have been all that expensive, not compared to the cost of forward-deploying a corps-level formation. But 'digging in' would have sent signals and carried implications that certain armchair generals and elected officials would have found unacceptable.

On the Japanese side, the problem was more one of equipment. While the Imperial Army Expeditionary Force formations were well equipped with Type-94s and F-15J units operated by veteran pilots, many of the Home Army and Royal Guard units were still using Gen 1.5 machines. Heavily upgraded in most cases, but that could only go so far. On top of that, it seemed that they'd dug up Josef Stalin and declared him Shogun. It had been hours since Hershel had stopped trying to count how many orders essentially boiled down to 'not one step back'.

At least he hadn't been idle in the months since he'd been assigned this posting. Most notably, he had acquired of several dozen Squad Support Guns from the Australians, along with more 105mm ammunition than the General Inspector could shake a stick at. That was already paying dividends; if he didn't make it off this island alive, he'd need to figure out how to return long enough to haunt the Armed Forces Committee into licensing the damn things.

The enemy had landed on a front across the north-western coast of the island just shy of thirty-five miles long, stretching from Fukuoka to just short of Kitakyushu. They'd then split into two Army Group-scale swarms, which advanced at roughly right angles. Army Group One advanced north-east and crossed into Honshu, while Army Group Two was focusing its advance along the north-east coast of the island.

Apparently, they were content to keep their left flank snug against the coastline. It seemed like they were trying to mask the garrison forces on the southern island, either in preparation for an annihilating blow or to stabilize Army Group One's advance into Honshu.

But regardless of their goal, the maneuvering BETA had pushed an enormous number of fleeing civilians toward his command, on the Northern border of the Nagasaki Prefecture.

He'd wondered if he'd done the right thing in protecting them. Perhaps half his casualties thus far could have been avoided if he'd explicitly ordered his men to withdraw and leave them to their fate when a situation became untenable.

And he had no idea if their sacrifice had bought those fleeing anything but a stay of execution, one purchased with the lives of soldiers who might have been used to inflict far more damage upon the enemy in the days to come.

But his Regiments were still intact. Seven squadrons of Strike Eagles, ten of Fighting Falcons, and... God, it was entirely possible that he was the only general officer left in this little corner of the world.

And if no orders came, he would hold until relieved.

[x]

Pilot Karen Nishimura, Zaku 8, tried to keep her hands steady as she loaded her last 36mm magazine into her assault cannon, one of the two she'd started the battle with.

She and the other six surviving members of Zaku Squadron were formed into a rough circle, blades drawn. There were BETA, mostly Tank and Grappler-class, on three sides; there numbers wouldn't have been truly dangerous, were it not for the fact that the squad had ammo totaling slightly less than three chaingun magazines left.

First Saori had been burned down by a laser, becoming another victim of the Eight Minutes of Death. Norio had been rammed by a Destroyer just after making it through his eight minutes.

Then they'd lost the Captain. He'd died well, at least, blades flashing as he was swarmed by Grapplers and dogpiled by Tanks, and the detonation of his jump units had given her squad, and a nearby artillery battery, time to withdraw. But then it seemed like everything started going wrong; she'd lost two more of her comrades as they were cornered in this basin, the laser threat too severe to jump out high enough to clear the numerous Grapplers.

"-Contact!" Hinata shouted. "Airborne, huge thermal signature. No IFF-"

Suddenly, tracers like a jet of sparks reached down and touched a Grappler a few hundred yards away, reducing the alien to a bloody ruin, with the scene repeating itself a dozen times within a few seconds.

Then Karen picked up the 'huge thermal signature', moments before it touched down thirty meters in front of her.

At once, the scale of its heat output made sense. The Jump Units on its legs shone like orbital boosters, which would be necessary to move the sheer bulk of the machine. Most TSFs were built like fencers or Samurai swordsmen; lithe, with agility and graceful strength.

This machine was built like one of the Golems of western lore; solid, with thick limbs and a stout body, shaped armor ridged with what had to be heat rejection surfaces in a way that gave it a sort of elegance shocking for something of such barbaric conception. And then there were the guns; at least six large cannon that she could see.

It bore the insignia of the United States on the rear of its strangely-shaped shoulder blocks; the usual star-in-circle surrounded by something else, like a mosaic outline of wings. Karen had heard of the American Tactical Surface Attackers, but had never seen one in person. She'd expected something more... Simplistic.

Then the probably-American did something really surprising. A pylon, mounted over the spine of his machine between the pair of cannons, elevated to horizontal, almost like an Eishi drawing a PB-blade. Something folded out from the pylon, extending past the side of the machine's head, the machine reached up and grabbed it with its right hand as a second, shorter, section unfolded further forward.

Then the TSA raised the weapon as bolts released, revealing a silvery-metallic blade mounted on a long, dull grey shaft.

The blade was straight-edged and slightly shorter than that of a Type-74 but with an odd angular extension over a short portion of the pole, and came to what was almost certainly a sharp piercing point.

Holding the vertically weapon in both hands, the American struck the ground with the counterweight, paused, then swung the polearm into a horizontal position, holding it next to his forearm vaguely like a cavalry lance.

It was about then that the BETA attacked in earnest.

The Melee-Attacker took three steps forward, running and using pulsed thrust to boost each step, as a gaggle of Grapplers charged over a pair of Destroyer corpses to attack.

He brought his weapon down in an overhead chop between the claws of a Grappler. The blade connected, and the Attacker raised his weapon and sidestepped, aiming for a repeat attack on the next BETA.

This one deflected the blade with its armored forearm and countered, though the Attacker slid back before the claw got dangerously close, then dispatched the BETA with a pair of diagonal chops.

The Surface Attacker continued to fight as the streams of tracers fell. Karen was finally able to pick up the IFF signals of another eleven units in a long arc around the basin, all apparently other Tactical Surface Attackers.

"Huh." Hinata said, after a moment. "He's actually pretty good."

"I don't think that's right." Karen watched a group of Tanks attempting to approach the Attacker from its off-side turn to meat chunks. "If you look, he's using the same few moves over and over. He's just using the reach and leverage of that naginata to compound the extra strength of his frame. He's practically cheating."

"Sis, this is a war." Kanata said. "There's no such thing as cheating in a war."

Then in a lower voice. "I would like to know what's going on here, though."

[x]

I drove my glaive into the unarmored back of a lone Destroyer-class and twisted, withdrawing the blade as the alien shuttered and died. The motion detectors and IR were reading clear, so it was probably

finally over.

That had been unpleasant.

This time, I'd gotten much closer to the BETA. It made the danger of the situation seem far more real and, probably, far more significant. I could have been killed, and that was... sobering.

I looked out at the scattered corpses. If something had gone wrong, I almost certainly would not have been gone before I had time to think about it. There might have been nothing I could do, but I'd have time to contemplate the fact that I was dying.

Maybe that was part of the unique horror.

"Seraph 1, are you all-clear?" Captain Jensen asked, opening a comm line.

I nodded. "Yeah. That was... certainly different. Did your-"

"We're fine." She shook her head. "What was that about, though?"

"Multi-role operability under adverse field conditions evaluation." I said. Hopefully development-procurement bureaucratese was opaque in all universes.

"Interesting. I didn't think we were developing that." Ingrid looked up for a moment. "I wonder what changed the policy on close-engagement. Maybe the shift from continental defense lines toward offshore containment and raiding."

"Or maybe High Command decided that we weren't sacrificing enough soldiers to the BETA."

Ingrid frowned. "Two problems with that. First, we already have the Orbital Divers as professional human sacrifices. Second, if we actually did get a decent screening unit, it might actually reduce casualties, and then we'd be right back where we started."

"Don't underestimate the capacity of high command to turn an asset into a liability whenever they can." I replied. "As Squad-level units are now equipped to engage enemies at close ranges, all calls for fire must be individually approved by divisional headquarters or higher so as to avoid excessive munitions expenditures."

"Heh. Speaking of casualties..." Ingrid did something, and a second communication window opened, showing a young Japanese man in a white fortified suit.

"This is Zaku 3. Kanata Nishimura, acting squadron leader." He shook his head. "You're a sight for sore eyes, Wyrm Squadron."

"I can imagine." Ingrid said. "But we burned the last of our ammo here, so we won't be much good until we resupply."

"I don't know about that." Kanata said, the head unit of his white Zuikaku turning to look at me. "That polearm work was pretty good. I've never seen gear like that before. In any case, we're in the same ammo situation. Both major supply bases outside Saga are still

broadcasting, so we were trying to get there to refuel and rearm.

Before Ingrid could respond, a third window opened. "Thank you, cousin, but that is enough. As the highest-ranked survivor, command falls to me by Guard protocol."

Kanata frowned. "Is this really a time for that sort of thing, Karen?" He said, though he sounded more weary than he did frustrated or angry.

"Of course. Strict hierarchy exists precisely for times of crisis."

The girl, Karen, did look very similar to Kanata, though female and a few years younger. I'd have no trouble believing they were related. They both looked... typically Japanese, assuming purple-black hair was included in that category, with appropriately noble features. Neither looked like they got much sun, Kanata more than his cousin, though I assumed that had more to do with sealed cockpits and space-age body gloves than it did with video games.

Kanata lowered his head slightly. "Then I stand relieved. What are your orders?"

"We will proceed to the Saga supply base at best speed. That is all." She glanced to the side. "It hardly matters what they do. You should know that better than I do."

Karen's comm window closed. Kanata left his open for a moment. Ingrid nodded, and he closed the line.

"Wonder what that was about?" Ingrid asked.

"She mentioned protocol." I said, looking up at the secondary display of the sky over my head. "Maybe she felt like it would have reflected poorly on her if she let a lower-ranking relative maintain command? Or she was just being immature."

"Hardly matters, I suppose." Ingrid shrugged, then switched to general broadcast. "All units, we're falling back to resupply. Standard NOE formation, transmitting coordinates. Take off on my mark and from up on me."

The Warthogs' engines ignited as they lifted off, shifting into formation as the Imperial Guard TSFs began to move. I sort of... tagged along near the back.

And with that, eighteen soldiers of mankind and one liar set off into the darkened sky.

2. Chapter 2

I looked through the composite-glass windows of the presently-unused command center, watching as Ingrid's Warthog was reloaded. It was impressive, to say the least.

As it turned out, the massive drum-magazines perched atop the A-10's shoulder blocks were only one of the three repositories for

ammunition for each of the machine's GAU-8/A rotary cannons. The mind-boggling part was that, at twelve and a half thousand rounds capacity, it was the smallest.

However, the external magazine's position on an exterior socket meant that it could be replaced during combat. The shoulder block and shoulder blade magazines needed to be chain-fed by dedicated equipment, as I was now observing.

I turned back to the strategic repeater. The supply base was not presently playing host to any operational commands, so only the battlespace-traffic control and coordination rooms were in use. My unregistered TSA and complete lack of unit insignias had caused considerable speculation as to my actual identity and purpose; I was either with the CIA, the MIB, or the Inquisition. Apparently, that had earned me some measure of respect; it had made getting into the command room fairly easy.

That wasn't nearly as bad, though, as the other reaction. Hope. I'd seen more than a few soldiers looking at me, as if my presence with an experimental weapon meant the situation wasn't as hopeless as it appeared.

Why would they make that sort of assumption, and why did I feel some need to not disappoint them? How did they expect me to be able to do anything? You couldn't fight a hurricane.

I looked back at the strategic repeater. The disposition of the enemy was represented by a stain of red creeping across the simplified landscape, shade representing the estimated BETA concentration. Laser batteries and TSF units were representing by static holographic miniatures, battlefield representation having come a sort of full circle.

The main swarms had made it more than halfway to the Pacific on the northern coast of Kyushu, with detached groups having ranged much further. The lead elements of the BETA Army Group One in Honshu had reached points past Hiroshima, though in the city itself still held.

I tapped a control key, adding a display layer to show the presence of displaced noncombatants, represented by blue dots scattered according to distribution. The BETA movements, along with apparent rumors that the Saga Defense Zone was holding, had pushed them toward Nagasaki.

The problem was that the BETA would push them into the sea in short order.

Presumably, they hoped to be able to escape by ship one of the ports in the area. That wasn't going to work. There simply weren't enough hulls present that could move people far enough away to be safe. The storm had prevented more from being sent from elsewhere, and now the presence of Laser-class made the southern sections of the inner channels usable only to warships. Perhaps a carrier could transport a large number of people beyond its crew if arrangements were made for its air wing to travel separately, but the gunboats and missile ships would simply be unable to transport more than a few hundred.

For a short distance, at the cost of their ability to lay down

supporting fire.

That wasn't going to work. We could be looking at upwards of five million evacuees, if a large portion of those inbound made it to the transient safety of our MLR.

With numbers like that... This was an engineering problem as much as it was a strategic one.

I opened an oceanographic map. The BETA had launched attacks across the English Channel and the Strait of Korea, but even during the Second Battle of Britain, had never launched a supporting attack from Scandinavia or Denmark across the North Sea. That meant that they could certainly survive the ten atmospheres at one hundred meters down, but probably not much more.

That made a certain about of sense. Humans could survive at those depths, but you could only really do that by using compressed air to raise your internal body pressure and equalize it with the environment, which coincidentally also became tricky after ten atmospheres.

The BETA survived off of energy from a Hive Reactor rather than ingested chemicals, meaning they would have no need for oxygen, supported by the fact that they could apparently survive in hard vacuum. That meant they wouldn't drown, but also that they might be able to take in outside water to equalize their internal pressure. It would work, but it would also become more difficult as pressure increased.

They would also suffer other problems involved with being underwater; drag would slow them down, as would buoyancy. They also needed to recharge from a Reactor relatively frequently. If I was remembering the Defense of Yokohama Base correctly, the combat strains only had something like five or seven days' worth of energy reserves.

All told, I needed to put a North Sea between the evacuees and the BETA. Which would mean...

Okinawa. I needed to get the refugees to Okinawa. The major fleet station there meant there was already infrastructure in place, both port facilities and structures that could be used as temporary shelter for large numbers of people. The approaches for the BETA would be long, far under water and easy to depth charge.

That left two obvious and considerably larger problems.

Ferries would help move people, but most of the ones we had access to were built for trips considerably shorter than the four-hundred-plus miles to Okinawa. That posed a twofold problem; provisions would need to be made to ensure they could go the distance, and they would have relatively little that we could eliminate to raise their passenger capacity above the rated value.

This was a task that called for ships. We could probably load a passenger liner with at least six to seven times its rated passenger capacity, and much of the crew were largely unconnected to the mechanical capability of the ship to sail and could be left behind if the vessel was making multiple trips. There was probably a difference between 'largely unconnected' and 'unrelated' here, but not as major

as the difference between 'alive' and 'eaten alive'.

If I figured an estimated twenty-five thousand people per passenger ship, then the ships we had might get a tithe civilians out. The BETA invasion had tanked the economy, and there just weren't that many people sailing overseas or cruising. We did have cargo ships, though, but just like back home, their crews were tiny and most of their hulls were basically open space dedicated to bulk or containerized storage.

But the container ships had frames! At least back in my nice, normal, alien-free world, a container ship would have a cavernous internal hold broken up by panels of hatches and scaffolding arrayed like a warship's frames. If that was true here, then we could have the military engineers, and anyone else who could be spared for or pressed into service assemble floors using the frames as scaffolding. We could use the load-bearing bottoms of the containers as material, and the massive hatches of the hold would mean we could use cargo cranes to lower them into place for welding.

But it would require that we be able to hold the ports of the Nagasaki area for days if we want to get everyone out. The whole island had until sometime tomorrow or the day after, if things went as preordained. I had a few ideas in that respect, but nothing-

I was jolted back to the supply base command room by the sound of the door sliding open. I turned and saw Ingrid walking into the room.

"There you are." She muttered. "You know it could have been a pain to track you down without a name, right? Is that a spy thing, or-"

"Great. Ingrid- Captain Jensen." I made a slashing motion across the strategic repeater, drawing a long line across the display. "I need you to help me figure out how to hold the line here long enough to turn a couple dozen cargo ships into frankenferries."

[x]

"You know," Ingrid said, looking over my evacuation plan and rough outline of a delaying action, "I don't know if you're crazy, and I should punch you in the face for being a danger to this entire command."

"Or?" I said, raising an eyebrow.

"Or if you're stupid, and I should punch you in the face on general principles." She said. "Or if this is brilliant, and I should kill you and act like it's my idea."

"And why is it that I'm considerably better off by being crazy or stupid here?" I asked.

"That's life." She replied. "But in all seriousness, I don't think the delaying action would work."

"I have my own doubts," I said, looking at the map and the angry red that seemed to have grown slightly in the minutes we were talking, "But what are you thinking?"

"Numbers." She said. "They have them, we don't. The mountains are a solid force multiplier, but the power disparity is too big. Maybe if we could use the warships more effectively we'd have a chance, but between the weather and the lasers, they aren't enough."

I sighed. "Plan B, then."

"Well, this should be good." Ingrid said.

"Why do you say that?"

"If it were a good plan, it would be Plan A." She shook her head.
"Let's hear it."

"Warship failure is a two-part problem. The forecast says the weather is rapidly improving." I smiled mirthlessly. "And Plan B is a Minigun Laser Hunt."

[x]

"I still don't understand what it is you are doing here." The Imperial Army officer said. "This is well outside your area of command."

Herschel Maxwell stopped, looking at the man next to him. "I have managed to confirm that the Major General is dead. As it happened, Ichiki died just over half an hour ago, so by treaty and UN regulation, I have been in command of this region for some time now."

The Japanese officer said nothing.

"And I have elected to move my headquarters toward the front. Here, for the moment."

"Very well, sir." The man seemed to deflate slightly.

"This is the command center." He said, opening the door.

"-Is a Minigun Laser Hunt."

[x]

"I assume you are aware of the horrific casualty rates the laserjagd units usually sustained." The General said, walking slowly into the room.

He was surprisingly young for the rank, perhaps somewhere in his thirties. He wore his dress uniform as if born to it, and his light-brown hair had an oddly natural appearance, as if it had simply grown into the close-cropped military cut, established a base of fire, and dug in.

"The East German line held for... slightly less than two years, I believe. The units dedicated to such operations suffered upwards of two hundred percent casualties during that time."

"Sir." I said, standing up sliding to attention and saluting in a sort of flowing maneuver I'm certain I never actually learned. "They

possessed few TSFs, and their technology was poor."

"As you were." The general said, sort of waving his hand near his brow, then leaning towards my strategic repeater. "And you believe our TSFs will fare better? We also lack pilots with training specialized to that task."

"Actually, sir, I do not propose using TSFs." I said, fighting to keep my voice even. Confidant, like someone qualified to propose such an insane plan might be. "My plan is to use Tactical Surface Attackers for the main force of the operation."

Ingrid's eyes widened, recoiling slightly.

"I believe that the superior firepower of such units, along with their high capacity for anti-laser countermeasures and a volume of armor sufficient to survive a brief and or glancing beam exposure, makes them capable of accomplishing the mission in the local environment." I said, looking at the General. "Assuming they are provided the appropriate support."

"That's a novel hypothesis." The General looked down at the strategic map. The corners of his lips twitched upwards. "But when the devil drives... What kind of support did you have in mind?"

"Area bombardment." I said. "It needs to target the whole AO, preferably with at least a few guns walking with the mobile unit, through the fire doesn't need to be particularly intense, and at least a few tubes need to be on standby at all times. The guns shift fire between BETA clusters semi-randomly, basically aiming to have rounds in flight to the widest possible area at any given time."

"I don't believe I've ever heard someone propose breaking every artillery rule in the book before. Not while sounding so confident, anyway. You would have every Laser-class in the area engaging your shells." He paused. "Why exactly do I not simply step out of the room and give Captain Jensen implicit permission to thrash you?"

"Because my plan would have every laser on the island burning down incoming shells." I said. "And a laser is still a blast furnace that happens to emit some light. The Lux strains are better than the old chemical lasers, but they're still generating huge volumes of heat with each shot. But that works for them, because they can get rid of the heat."

"And that hangs a neon sign over their heads."

"So you would use IR observation to avoid their lines of fire for penetration and exfiltration?" The General asked.

"No, sir." I said. "We use IR scopes, portable artillery, and clear comms to send them to hell."

[x]

I looked out over the Japanese section of the Supply Base hanger. It looked a lot like the US/UN wing, if perhaps a bit more colorful. All five colors of Imperial Guard color-coded TSFs were present, though of the thirty-plus units present, there was only one blue Regent House Affiliated machine and two of the red ones. There were three

yellow units, including Karen's machine. That one had taken some minor damage to its shoulder block armor, though it didn't have any effect on the mechanical performance of the unit and thus could be fixed 'later'.

That was, of course, assuming that there was a 'later'. My collection of ideas, which Brigadier General Maxwell had transmuted into a full blown Plan and given the cheery name of Operation Horus, called for the deployment of more than thirty Mobile Weapons in the Hunt. Supporting them would be a substantial number of fire support assets; self-propelled guns, Multiple-Launch Rocket Systems, the destroyers USS Hackworth and HMAS Stonefish, and the USS Ticonderoga herself. In addition, a number of other Tactical Armor units had been slated for diversionary and supporting attacks or earmarked for limited-scope counterattacks following our Laser Suppression.

In a very real way, reviewing the forces I'd set in motion was scarier than facing down the BETA.

That had been the moment that it hit me that I might actually make things worse. Fighting the BETA, I could get myself killed. If Operation Horus went bad, I could be responsible for causing the death of hundreds of soldiers and possibly compromising the ability of the forces now under Maxwell to withdraw from Kyushu. It was currently 2246 hours, and the first movement the operation, Nilokeras, was set to begin at midnight.

If I managed to cause the line to fail in the early morning instead of half a day or more later, the battle on Honshu, currently close-fought, could turn into rout. The BETA could overrun the Tokyo Bay Area, and obliterate Japan's core industrial belt rather than merely gutting it.

Focus on the positive. If Operation Horus was at least partially successful, we might be able to buy a day or more for the forces on the main island. Sure, there was a good chance that would mean I was dead, and it probably wouldn't help the surviving people of Kyushu, but it would be better than the Alternative.

If Nilokeras worked to the best-case projections, we might save at least a few hundred thousand people from the alien horde. Depending on how much damage we could do with artillery during and after the laserjagd, we could buy even more time for the soldiers fighting in the North.

Best case scenario, with the components of Operation Hours following and contingent on the hunt, we would inflict massive damage on the BETA Army Group Two. The enemy would be forced to halt the northward flow of combat strains long enough to eliminate the risk of an encirclement, stalling the offensive of Army Group One. That would buy time that the defenders on that front needed dearly, and potentially allow the forces in Shikoku to dig in enough to repulse the BETA thrust that would fall on them.

And, of course, we would be able to evacuate the survivors of Kyushu, preserving the people and the garrison forces.

I turned, looking out past the entrance to the cavernous hanger to the glittering river of light in the distance. It was a highway, thousands of people fleeing, some in vehicles, many on foot. If the

BETA reached them...

I will protect those who cannot protect themselves. Those words meant something to me, now.

I didn't want to be here. This was a bleak world, and staying at this supply base meant accepting that. Maybe running would end poorly in the long term, but because I was an electronic void, with absolutely nothing but myself saying I existed. It wasn't as if that would be less of a problem if I stayed here. Leaving would have been easy. There were any number of ways I could have done it; I had three worked out almost without thinking.

And yet here I was. It was crazy. I had almost nothing, not even a shadow of the skeleton of ideas that had become Operation Horus, for a strategy going forward.

"What are you doing here?"

Karen Nishimura glared at me. Like me, she had not changed out of her fortified suit, though I felt like the lack of a charisma bonus on my suit made that a much more valid option for me.

"Contemplating my place in the world." I said. "Not something I ever expected to be a practical problem."

"Are you—" She shook her head. "Why are you doing that here?"

I paused for a moment. "I mostly just wandered here, I guess. Is this a restricted area?"

"No." Karen said, terse. She shook her head. "What are you trying to do here? What is it that you're trying to prove?"

"I'm not sure what you mean. I'm trying to win the war. Does there have to be some ulterior motive?"

"It's just like this new plan. Even if you manage to surpass the lasers, you'll probably screw up this bombardment too." She looked out at her Zuikaku. "And to do that, you need real warriors to babysit you while you play around with your portable artillery—"

"Actually," I said, "You get to have the big guns for this op."

I've never seen a person actually freeze. That's not quite what happened here; Karen just stopped, then slowly turned to actually look at me.

"What?"

The thought occurred that she had probably been trained in some form of personal combat, possibly unarmed. I suddenly felt the lack of a sidearm much more acutely.

"The initial plan was to have the Strike Eagles carry the SSGs, but after we got confirmation that the Guard was on board I decided we'd have them do it instead."

Perhaps that phrasing was not my best work.

"Look. You're trained and equipped for close-quarters combat, which our Strike Eagles aren't. They're optimized for shooting. But each unit can only be doing one thing at a time."

She wasn't doing anything, yet.

"There's a good chance that we'll need to conduct long-distance bombardment while engaged in direct-fire gunplay." I continued. "But if close combat becomes necessary, then we'll be engaged sufficiently heavily that bombardment can be suspended, and the lines of fire for the low-angle shots we're using may not be open."

After a moment, Karen seemed to relax, slightly. I'd gambled that she'd be enough of a solider to at least see my reasoning, even if she didn't hate it any less.

She turned back towards the hangar bay. I enacted a tactical withdrawal.

[x]

I looked over the communication procedure flow diagram again. It seemed fairly simple, but combat had a way of hanging life from small things. My mysteriously acquired knowledge seemed to center much more on technical skill than this sort of protocol. I also knew basically nothing about TSF combat formations, but considering that General Maxwell, Ingrid, and I had essentially made up the formations we'd be using for this operation a bit more than an hour ago, I decided those could wait.

"You know, this scene really is funny, in a sense." Kanata said. "I think it's that sort of gallows humor that's gotten me through this."

I looked up. I hadn't seen him enter.

"You're more or less the right age, and right now you look like you're studying for some kind of exam." He smiled. "And yet, in less than half an hour, we all face mortal combat."

"What do you mean, 'some kind' of exam?" I asked. "This is exactly an exam. Don't you know there is no teacher except the enemy?"

"I suppose that's true." He smiled, sitting down across the table from me. "Michael Kranz."

I'd been asked the question twice now, when Ingrid and then General Maxwell asked my name. That was what I'd given both times.

The Archangel of War and the master of Apollo Mission Control. It seemed appropriate, somehow, though if I'd thought about it more before being asked, I probably would have chosen something more nondescript.

"I thought so." Kanata said, then shrugged. "I don't particularly care what you name really is, but I have to ask. Does your agenda stand at cross purposes with the defense of Japan?"

I looked him in the eye. "No. I have no ill will toward your nation,

and I don't know if I see Christmas without a command performance and positive results here."

Kanata leaned back, closing his eyes. "Well, it isn't as if I haven't played the cloak-and-dagger game a few times myself. And Operation Horus. You had a hand in that?"

"Yes." I said. "I assume you don't like it either?"

"It's a good plan, actually." Kanata said. "I especially like the part where the civilians don't die. Risky as hell, but we aren't at a juncture that allows anything less."

"And you don't have any complaints about the... methodology?"

"Karen?"

"Karen." I paused. "How did you know?"

"I know my cousin reasonably well." Kanata said. "I apologize for whatever she may have said."

"It's fine." I replied. "She was basically what I expected."

"Should I be insulted?"

"No." I said. "You're good. Great, actually, for a sword-swinging barbarian deathly afraid of halfway decent weaponry."

"Well, it seems I was wrong about you." Kanata turned up his face as he spoke. "I thought you were passable, at least for a..."

He looked back down at me. "Will you take 'artillery fetishist' as a compliment?"

"You say that like you wouldn't."

It took me a moment to process the fact that he was genuinely laughing.

[x]

"This is command to all units." General Maxwell said. "Operation Nilokeras commences now. I need not remind you that victory may well hinge on your actions in the hours to come. Pre-heating will be timed to begin with launch. Units, confirm status."

It was an utterly pointless ritual, sharing information that all present already knew. It served only to help the pilot get psyched up, and was thus enormously helpful."

"32nd Attack Squadron." Ingrid said, voice rich with anticipation. "Ready for launch."

"Imperial Guard Zaku Squadron." Karen said, cool and professional. "Prepared to engage."

"USMC Revenant Company." Captain Jeremiah Garrett said in what was not quite a roar. "Semper Fi. Do or Die."

"501st Troop, Royal Australian Air Force." Lieutenant Ethan Smith added. "Bugs on the barbie."

"Good hunting." Maxwell said, closing the line.

"Confirming beginning of bombardment." Wyrm 7, Owen Haring, said.

I opened a general line to the formation. I'd made two of the classic blunders; I'd shown up at a fortress in distress, acted mysterious, and come up with a stupid plan, and I'd gotten involved in a land war in Asia.

My grip tightened on the control sticks. I didn't exist here; to survive, I'd have to pretend to be someone. Maybe I could be the man the situation seemed to demand, at least for a while.

There had been one note of good news, at least. Task Force Tango Delta had set sail from the Subic Bay anchorage, and the main body of the Fifth Fleet had launched not long after. I had been informed for planning purposes, but it was still being kept quiet; if word got out and the fleets had to turn away on approach, it could be disastrous for morale.

As cold as the orders were, they made sense. The battlefleets were like fine swords; strong and powerful, but also surprisingly fragile if used poorly. If the fighting here went poorly, those ships could be essential in stabilizing the Far East Defense Line.

"All units, begin sequential launch." Captain Garrett said. He had operational command, Ingrid was his second. I was in some sort of wired advisory role. "Stay low, assume laser warning in effect at all times. Assume formation and prepare to link up with Canary Flight. Revenant 1, launching."

"Wyrm 1, launching." Ingrid said.

No turning back now.

"Seraph 1, launching."

The catapult under my feet jolted, launching me forward. I could feel it shaking through the feedback provided by my Mind Impulse Interface; I wondered if it had been built to handle Surface Attackers. The Japanese didn't operate A-10s, after all.

The magnetohydrodynamic thermal jets in my Jump Units reached full operational levels. The catapult hit the end of its track and I continued forward, rising into the air as the rest of the units in the formation continued to launch. The Eleven A-10C units of the Blizzard Wyrms, Zaku Squadron's seven Type-82s, the ten F-15Es of Revenant Squadron, and the Australian 501st, eight F-16D TSFs.

And me. Thirty-seven tactical armor units total.

Seraph Battalion.

I looked up as the formation came together. Distant lights sparkled and flashed in the sky overhead, the lasers ahead already engaging the preparatory bombardment. Most of the interceptions were faint,

created by glancing strikes, punctuated by the much brighter vaporization flares of solid hits. All told, we were throwing almost half a ton of metal at the foe every single second in a maneuver that barely qualified as a diversion.

Perhaps there were a few good things in this world.

"This is Legion Control to Seraph 0." I glanced at the comm window; Legion Control had opened a private line to me directly. "Canary Flight, at your service, sir."

"Roger that, Legion." I said, looking at the location of the stream of recon drones moving into position just overhead. "You are good to go on placement."

Downlink stream analysis complete - Target signatures confirmed.

[x]

Misaki was tired. They'd gotten the evacuation order just before three in the afternoon, and had been walking almost constantly ever since. The rain had mostly stopped, at least, though Misaki only vaguely remember what it was like to be warm, or dry.

Like most outside of the nobility, her family didn't have a car; ever since the loss of the oil fields in the Middle East and Siberia, gas was too expensive to be worthwhile. She had been able to manage, but there had been those that couldn't. More of them that she wanted to think about.

Her parents had heard that the Karatsu-Saga line was still holding and decided to go that way, despite the fact that heading south would have kept them further from the BETA. Unless the southern lines collapsed. They weren't the only ones; a jagged river of humanity stretched along the expressway and out of sight in both directions.

Suddenly, there was an odd rushing sound; like wind, but somehow distant. She felt a tugging on her arm and looked down.

"Sis, what's that!" She looked up, following her little brother's pointing finger.

[x]

"Alright people, this is it." Captain Garrett said. "Laser battery, twenty-two kilometers away. We'll engage as soon as we clear this ridge. Thirty and change of the little fuckers; they shouldn't have a line of fire, but don't count on it. Engage."

I surged my drives as I crossed the low end of the rise, gliding over it in a rough line with the rest of the forward section, all A-10s and Strike Eagles. I'd appropriated a pair of assault cannons to save on railgun ammo and had them both at the ready, but the valley was empty. That was good; if there'd been any combat strains here, they would have been within easy striking distance of the stragglers on the highway only a few miles away.

The second group came over the ridge a moment later; seven Zuikaku

and three Fighting Falcons, all with Squad Support Guns. I checked by long-range scopes.

"Supporting fire confirmed. Broadcasting firing solutions on auxiliary data one." I announced, watching as everything fell into place. "Light em' up!"

The TSFs raised their not-quite-oversized guns as they lifted off the surface slightly. A timer hit zero.

The ten designated gunners opened fire at the same moment as the enemy Lasers began intercepting the 175mm shells from the distant batteries of M2001-B Crusader Self-Propelled Guns, forming the 'low-lethal' of a textbook multi-vector saturation attack.

The Jump Units of the bombardment units flared as they fired, the thrust counteracting the recoil of the guns. Moving as a single rigid body with the gun, the TSFs were able to get away with lacking a significant recoil dampener. The problem posed by lacking a solid footing solved by discarding it entirely

The 105mm SSG could fire at 30 rpm for short bursts, though they couldn't sustain that rate for a number of reason. That didn't matter here; the twenty-second fire mission was an unqualified success.

I fired a recon shell as Seraph Battalion moved down into the valley. Those lasers were a fraction of a tithe of what we needed to kill, and there was no need to take pointless risks.

"Impact verified. Target battery is quiet, distributed, and cooling." Distributed, in this context, meaning something similar to 'liquefied'. "Kill confirmed."

My map updated with the data from the shell. "Plotting next target, heat signature is a bit bigger."

"We can move to the end of the valley and purge them from hull-down." Ingrid said, then grinned.

"I see it." Jeremiah said. "Plotting route and establishing fire support. Execute."

We accelerated as we moved down the valley, able to risk a few extra meters of height with massive cover on either side."

"Fire plan is ready." I said, as we approached. "Did anyone have anything come up outside projections on the recoil last time?"

"My shoulder pressure was a bit high, but I can adjust—" Karen's eyes narrowed. "Why do you care?"

"We can't lose a gunner." I muttered. "Not to something like mechanical failure."

I shook my head. "Just don't blow your arm off. If a man and his horse are one, then a man and his rifle are indistinguishable. You are the gun."

Target point. "Open fire." I said over the general broadcast, then to myself. "There is no spoon."

Another twenty seconds of fire, another distributed target. The Crusaders might have gotten the kill this time, but it wasn't like they were close enough to take the credit.

"Wait. Looks like we have company up ahead." Ethan Smith, the Australian flight leader, said. "It looks like-"

"Perfect." Ingrid said, as Ethan broadcast the data. "Wyrms, by the numbers. We've got a few hundred corpses over there who haven't got the message. Don't waste Avenger ammo unless you have a reason."

"Marines, back them up." Jeremiah said. "Make sure they can't mass to close. Falcons, cover the flanks and take deflection shots any Destroyers that get their faces pointed the right way. Gunners, standby for fire support but do not engage unless necessary. Saving bullets is the name of the game."

We took off again. As a whole, the formation had yet to completely cease motion. That was key; this was a cavalry raid, pure and simple. If we stayed still long enough to let the infantry mass on us and from square, we died.

The next area we entered was considerably wider than the previous valley, sparsely forested, with what appeared to be a small abandoned town some distance away.

Scattered here and there were a number of small Company-Scale BETA swarms, not unlike the one I had encountered just after awakening.

That had only been a couple of hours ago. God. It felt like... longer.

We started killing. The enhanced range of the AMWS-21 American standard-issue assault cannon came into its own. It was considerably less expendable than the GWS-9 or Type-87, irritating logistics officers three times faster than an ordinary Assault Cannon as the inexplicable joke went, but the integral ADS gunsight sensor and datalink, stabilized chaingun, and extended cannon barrel gave it much more consistent performance as range increased.

They had no Destroyer lines, no mass, and no concentration. I don't think we let an alien within half a mile of us as we made our way through the valley. It may have been a drop in the bucket, all things considered, but I suppose the BETA would miss sixteen hundred Tanks and Grapplers more than we would miss the six or so magazines worth of chaingun ammo it took to exterminate them.

Two more small groups of Laser-class met their ends under our guns as we moved. We were getting into rhythm now, part of the Battalion would move forward with the gunners behind them, then the formation would drift back together as gunners slowed during the barrage.

"This is Warden Actual to Seraph Leads." Warden was the callsign for General Maxwell's Headquarters, and he was calling personally, which was weird and probably not good.

"We read you five by five, Warden Actual." Jeremiah responded, almost immediately.

"Good. You're doing excellent work out there. It's small, but we're detecting a marked increase in the firing rate of their lasers. I have a new task for you; Space Command spotted a large enemy detachment moving our way from the infested zones to the east. Division-scale."

He paused. "They've spread out to handle the terrain, so artillery isn't as efficient as we'd like; possibly less than we can accept, considering the overall supply status. They aren't too far from your location and they're still moving at overland speed, though. Pay them a visit and reorganize their workflow, then bug out before they can jeopardize your mission. Warden Actual out."

Ingrid shook her head, "Twenty thousand in one assault swarm." She smiled. "I think we can manage."

I marked a few lines on my map. "We should be able to move to enfilade them, though. That'll multiply the effectiveness of your Avengers. We can pick a spot with some breathing room, then call in artillery and fall back once they press an attack close enough to be concerning."

"Come on." Ingrid said. "I expect better from you. We lugged the SSGs all the way here, so we should at least try to use them."

[x]

Karen Nishimura was uncomfortable.

It wasn't the fighting, exactly; that was going well, a welcome reprieve from the events yesterday. It felt like it was going too well, but perhaps the for once the American 'strategy' was working as advertised.

Essentially, Karen believed she had taken the measure of the Tactical Surface Attacker. When they'd fought the BETA encircling her squadron they'd performed adequately, though the situation had only been truly dangerous because her squad had been nearly out of ammunition. The short bursts of fire they'd used had hardly been impressive; certainly not enough to justify their enormous frame-mounted cannons and associated costs to maneuverability.

She was just now processing the fact that when the leader of the Blizzard Wyrms had said they had burned the last of their ammo in that fight, she meant that they'd started that fight near empty.

They flew toward the Division-sized heard and took up a position with a slight height advantage over main body of the group. Already having destroyed the only Laser batteries that might have been able to move to target the position made the high ground purely beneficial. It was a bit closer to the enemy than she might have liked; she had no idea why the Americans had picked it.

Then forty-eight Assault Cannons each rapid-fired a full magazine of canister shot into the heard below.

Her instructors had said that canister was unreliable beyond fairly short range; it would likely inflict meaningful injuries on a large portion of enemies within its conical effect zone to a range of up to two hundred meters, and varying degrees of harm to some targets as far as five hundred meters away.

Now, nothing inside that range survived.

Then, twenty-two Avenger rotary cannons opened up, pouring a river of fire across the BETA outside the kill zone of the canister storm. The Destroyer-class died first, but the distinction was largely academic.

What had the American piloting the more advanced Attacker said? There was no distinction between a man and his rifle. She had no idea how he'd known the original saying; today it was almost exclusively used by Imperial Eishi. It was surprising to hear a foreign pilot say it, shocking from him. Oddly, during the attacks on the lasers, it had seemed helpful. Now, without a pre-generated fire plan...

She pressed one of the auxiliary control switches. The Squad Support Gun had been modified with a dual receiver, allowing it to draw rounds from one of two barrel-shaped magazines at a time. Thus far, she had only fired the... ICM, he'd called it, against the Laser-class. Now, she instructed her weapon to draw Variable-Timed blast fragmentation shells.

The Type-82 was not designed to employ any form of arc-fire weapons. As a result, they'd needed to, humiliatingly, use firing solutions generated by one of the Surface Attackers for the twenty-plus-kilometer anti-laser barrages. But now...

Karen pressed the Squad Support gun to the shoulder of her machine and leaned into it. She opened a long-range search window, then selected a group of targets and focused it on them. She elevated the rifle, trying to remember the trajectories she'd seen earlier.

She pressed the firing switch.

The gun struck her shoulder, and she could see a moment before the burst of smoke heralded the detonation of the shell that she'd been off-target. As the blast fragments shredded a pair of Tanks, she adjusted her stance.

Something shifted.

Karen fired.

The 105mm shell detonated between a pair of Grapplers, tearing their flanks open as a shower of hot steel ruined the dozen Tank-class screening them.

A new target came into focus on her sighting window, just as the mechanism finished cycling a new VT shell into the chamber. Another group of dead aliens.

Shift. Kill. Shift. Kill.

It was perfect. A crystallization of everything she'd ever learned

set at a right angle, suddenly complete. Action-reaction blade control transformed perfectly into recoil control. Footing lessons becoming something almost identical, and yet utterly different. She glided into the edge of the canister kill zone, expanding her targeting angle as she fired just slightly less quickly than the mechanism would allow. She wasn't commanding the weapon, nor was she trusting its independent agency.

It was a simple extension of her will.

A Destroyer-class, one that had escaped the Thunderbolts' initial sweep, died as it tried to turn. Karen let out some light a laugh as she watched the creature fall, reaching down and drawing a fresh VT magazine as the first detached and dropped. Several groups on the far flank of the herd were beginning to coalesce and advance. That would not be allowed.

Barrel Temperature Warning - Enforced shutdown

Karen's Type-82 set down as her weapon went silent, once more becoming simply a useful dead weight.

She blushed almost immediately. What had shebeen doing? Had she actually giggled? The five-party link between the squadleaders and him was still active, but it didn't sound like anyone had noticed. They were too busy pouring fire onto the BETA.

The battle had become, and subsequently ceased to be, a real contest during her... episode. With the A-10Cs able to fire down the long axis of the enemy group, they'd been able to inflict devastating casualties. That had prevented the enemy from recovering quickly from the sudden attack, and given the Assault Cannon fire from the rest of the formation time to work. The BETA had been locally denied the mass that gave them their overwhelming power.

She wasn't going to think about what effect her flailing might have had. He first shot had only killed two Tank-class units; it couldn't have accomplished anything of note. She would have to strive to make up for the shame of failing to contribute to the battle.

[x]

"Now this," Ingrid said, opening up with her Avengers as the destroyers dropped and ground to a halt, "Is the life. Kills for days, and no one-"

"You should be careful, lass." Lieutenant Smith said. "We mustn't forget the heroic sacrifices made by Canary Flight this morning. They died as warriors; may a flight of Autovalkyries carry them to the gates of Cybervalhalla."

"Right." Ingrid said, as the gunners started their bombardment. "But this, fighting the BETA by deep strike? Why didn't they cover this sort of thing in Basic?"

"The situation and terrain here are working in our favor." I said absently, looking at an odd set of sensor readings. "But the big reason is that it's dangerous and insane."

"Empirical evidence suggests otherwise." Ingrid said dryly.

"Oh, here, it's merely a high-risk high-return. But as Bobby Lee demonstrated—" Crap. Did he exist here? The timeline didn't diverge for sure until two decades after the civil war, but there was no way to know for sure if there hadn't been minor changes before that.

"-A force in an inferior position can achieve results if they take smart risks. But they have to know to pick the right gambles to make. Imagine trying to do this with Phantoms."

"That would suck." Ingrid said. "We would've died in five minutes."

"But one here has Phantoms." Ethan said. "No half-decent country has fielded a front line unit with them for a decade."

"Correct. And in a way, Seraph Battalion is now the only unit in this theater to be using anything but Phantoms."

"Okay." Ingrid said. "I'm pretty sure I saw some Shiranui units back at the base, but I could have been hallucinating."

Speaking of which, I looked at Karen's machine, which had stood down after finishing the fire mission. She could hear the whole conversation over the squadleader datalink, but hadn't said anything yet.

I was a bit concerned. She'd made some strange noises during the battle with the Division-swarm; if she'd developed some form of psychosis, she might not only be unfit for flight, but also dangerously insane. That would be a shame; she was actually rather competent. I could only assume that was the reason I had yet to even consider quenchgunning her when no one was looking.

"What I mean, Ingrid, is that the Phantom or its variants were essentially the only units used during the formative years of Tactical Armor doctrine. It was the only game in town for nearly the first decade of the war, and a lot of the lessons we learned then are still being applied to strategy and tactics today." I paused. "And they say you're always preparing for the last war. The same, I think, can be true during a war."

"Oh. So we're the Nazis." Ingrid said, realization brightening. "Err, that is, we're the first ones to take armor and mechanization and use them for blitzkrieg-style mobile warfare."

"Exactly." I said. I might have said something witty to follow it up, but at that moment, one of the drones of Canary Flight vanished.

Slight exaggeration; it was explosively vaporized. My sensors registered a flash of scattered photons as it happened, along with a faint coronal scattering along a line leading to the east. The only thing that could have done that was-

HEAVY LASER UNIT THEATER WARNING ISSUED

CAUTION - HEAVY LASER PROJECTED LOCATION 14 KM

Well then.

Shit.

End
file.